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EAST TIMOR'S SECRET SUFFERI

by Michael Chamberlain

While the US government and the major media have given much attention to accounts of widespread killings and starvation in Cambodia, Indonesia's protracted invasion and massive violation of human rights in little-known East Timor has only begun to gain public notice. Why hasn't anyone heard about how Indonesia has illegally annexed, slaughtered and starved the people of East Timor? The US government is deeply involved in both the tragedy and the cover-up.

The East Indies island of East Timor is located 350 miles off Australia. Portugal ruled the eastern half of the island for more than 400 years, while the Dutch ruled the western half. After World War II, the Indonesian Republic was formed, made up of islands that had been the Netherlands East Indies. East Timor, however, remained a Portuguese colony. Largely due to centuries of isolation, East Timor is quite different, ethnically and linguistically, from the surrounding Indonesian islands. Independence for the territory only became a possibility in 1974, when the fifty year old dictatorship in Portugal was overthrown. But the 1975 Indonesian invasion has brutally denied East Timor the right to determine its own future.

Although the Indonesian government strenuously denies it, there are credible reports that 200,000 East Timorese have died since the 1975 invasion. Most of the survivors have been forced into "resettlement camps" where starvation was widespread until a few months ago; even now, deprivation is acute. In a land that once supported 690,000 people, another 20-25,000 have died of diseases brought on by advanced malnutrition, according to refugee relief specialists. During hearings last December before the House Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs, Bruce Cameron of the Americans for Democratic Action cited a leaked report prepared by US officials after a September 1979 visit to East Timor. The report stated that it was rare *not* to see a child or an adult in "an advanced state of malnutrition." Thousands were suffering from marasmus, a wasting disease that results when the body begins to consume its own protein. The report also noted widespread malaria and tuberculosis.

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The Indonesian regime, with crucial backing from the US State Department, has tried to claim that current conditions are the result of a brief civil war that took place over four years ago, drought and other "geoclimatic factors"; the consequences of the Indonesian invasion are downplayed to the extent that one has to search for mention of this in US government testimony. However, there is compelling evidence that the tragedy is a direct result of the Indonesian army's policy of starving the East Timorese into submission.

This article is authored by Michael Chamberlain, associate of the Asian Center in New York City.

The US Connection

The United States has important oil interests and other key investments in Indonesia, an OPEC country. Indonesia is also an anti-communist, largely Muslim nation with the fifth largest population in the world. It commands sea lanes between the Pacific and Indian Oceans. After the US withdrawal from Indochina in 1975, American policymakers assigned added importance to Indonesia's role in Southeast Asia.

Since General Suharto's military regime came to power in 1965, amidst a bloodbath that destroyed the powerful Indonesian Communist Party, the United States has given strong support to Indonesia. In spite of longstanding and brutal violations of human rights, the United States has forcefully defended the Suharto regime. The State Department has had its own long-standing policy of being unwilling to annoy the Indonesian generals in any way when it comes to human rights questions. In this context, it is easy to understand why the US has given its complete cooperation to Indonesia in the East Timor affair: militarily, diplomatically, and—a matter of key importance—in helping to orchestrate a cover-up.

Under Congressional questioning, the State Department has admitted that "roughly 90% of the arms available to the Indonesian military at the time of the invasion were US supplied. US officials also testified that Indonesia could not have carried out the Timor operation without US equipment. And shortly after the invasion, the US began to ship a squadron of Rockwell OV-10 "Bronco" counter-insurgency aircraft to Indonesia. A Portuguese Catholic priest who witnessed Indonesian operations said that the Broncos were a key element in the scorched earth policy that led to widespread starvation. Shipments of these and other arms were made at crucial times, coinciding with planned Indonesian offensives. US military sales to Indonesia jumped from $3.1 million in 1976 to $112 million in 1978.

The State Department claimed that the US secretly stopped processing new weapons orders for Indonesia in the six-month period following the December 1975 invasion. This stoppage was so "secret," in fact, that the State Department admits that they never told the Indonesians about it. In early 1978, it was revealed that this policy never went into effect: Four separate orders, mainly for OV-10 Bronco spare parts and maintenance, were processed during the 1975-76 period.

Recently, however, the State Department cover-up over East Timor has been coming unravelled, as the dimensions of the Timor tragedy have received some attention in the US press. At a December 1979 hearing, Rep. Tom Harkin (D-IA), spoke out against the State Department position. And in early March, 19 other members of Congress joined Harkin in co-sponsoring a resolution that will soon go to the House floor. The resolution calls for increased humanitarian aid to East Timor and much more international monitoring to go with it; free emigration from the territory (few people have been allowed to leave since the 1975 invasion); and, importantly, an Indonesian withdrawal from the territory. It appears that pressure for a change in US policy is continuing to grow, while the national media is showing more interest in the issue than ever before. What has been made obvious to senators and congresspeople is not only the horror of East Timor, but the level and character of US involvement. •

Violations of human rights by the Indonesian military regime are nothing new. More than half a million people were arrested during anti-communist pogroms in 1965-66. At least 30,000 political detainees were held for more than 12 years despite the fact that the government itself admitted that there was insufficient evidence to try them. Following a worldwide campaign on the Indonesian prisoners by Amnesty International in 1976 and 1977, and a series of US Congressional hearings, large-scale releases were carried out. This shows that concerted pressure can move the Indonesian government—and the US State Department—to change its policies. While high US officials have praised the Indonesian generals for carrying out the releases, why has Washington completely ignored the carnage in East Timor? But how did the tragedy come about?

Origins of the War

Following the April 1974 change in government in Lisbon, decolonization talks began between the Portuguese and several newly-formed political associations in East Timor. Independent observers noted that an overwhelming majority of the population favored independence; there was also a small group that wanted union with Indonesia. It has been reported that the Indonesian regime feared the possibility of an independent Timor because such a state would be weak and thus subject to big power influence; in this view, it would also stimulate separatist movements in Indonesia. Some experts, however, see the Indonesian invasion as the product of a tiny group of dictatorial army generals who saw and seized an opportunity to extend their control. The generals were willing to tolerate the Portuguese presence and nothing else. Others have stated that if East Timor had become a successful small state it would be a dangerous example for nearby, poverty-stricken Indonesian islands—dangerous, that is, to the right-wing military regime in Jakarta, the Indonesian capital. Nonetheless, most experts believe that all these fears were groundless.

In late 1974, Indonesian military intelligence began to create tensions between Timorese groups by any means they could. By August 1975, the right-wing Timorese Democratic Union (UDT) staged an armed coup, with Indonesian backing. The coup was designed to eliminate many leaders of FRETILIN (Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor), a popular nationalist coalition that had instituted agricultural cooperatives, literacy and medical programs and other important reforms. The Timorese right-wing felt threatened by these reforms and also felt pressure from the Indonesian military which was threatening to invade unless FRETILIN was neutralized. But the Timorese troops in the Portugese

colonial army supported FRETILIN and quickly defeated UDT. Although neutral observers have said that the FRETILIN administration that governed from September to early December 1975 was responsible and moderate, the stage was set for an Indonesian invasion. Portugal, in the middle of its own domestic crisis in late 1975, hastily abandoned the territory. Although Lisbon did not support an Indonesian invasion, it took no effective steps to prevent it—a source of much of the collective guilt that is evident in Portugal today whenever Timor is discussed. Indonesia launched its full-scale invasion on December 7, 1975, the day after President Ford and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger visited Jakarta. While there, Kissinger told the press that, "the United States understands Indonesia's position on the question of East Timor."

The United Nations immediately called for the withdrawal of Indonesian troops, but instead of withdrawing, the Indonesian army intensified their attacks. The failure of the US and other countries under US influence to support UN initiatives gave Indonesia the green light to continue the invasion. FRETILIN, for its part, put up stiff resistance in the mountainous interior, on familiar terrain. Indonesia's hopes for a quick victory vanished. Still, President Suharto announced the annexation of East Timor in July 1976; the UN—but not the US—still rejects Indonesia's claim to sovereignty over East Timor.

Since the war against FRETILIN had proved to be costly and difficult, the Indonesian forces turned to aerial bombardment as a strategy to force the population out of FRETILIN-held areas, and here the OV-10 Broncos showed their usefulness. Villages were bombed, crops were destroyed, and people were herded into the so-called "resettlement centers." Once in the camps, people were prevented from farming their lands, making the situation worse. For people who managed to elude the Indonesians, the bombing made food production impossible, particularly in 1977 and 1978.

By September 1978, it became clear that the Indonesian military had never adequately supplied the people it had forced into the camps; strong evidence indicates that tens of thousands literally starved to death. The Indonesian military kept independent relief agencies out of the territory until 1979 in an effort to keep the situation quiet. Meanwhile, relief aid, food and medicine, were used as a political weapon to force the population into accepting the occupation. The army also profitted by selling relief supplies at inflated prices. Such reports continually filtered out through Indonesian relief organizations, rare reports and refugees who made it to Portugal.

Even now, only a handful of independent relief workers are allowed to operate in East Timor. Any Indonesian doing this work is automatically subject to military coercion, thus the need for a foreign presence. The supplies exist to alleviate East Timor's suffering, but as of now, the Indonesian military is still keeping out additional outside relief personnel who are needed if things are to improve significantly. More than 300,000 people are in need of relief at present; only four foreigners are there to administer the program—this, in a Connecticut-sized territory with some of the most difficult terrain in Southeast Asia.

Predictably, the State Department has supported the Indonesian restrictions—restrictions that the US has been fighting in Cambodia. It is worth noting that late last year, the International Red Cross said that the East Timor situation was worse than that in Biafra and potentially more serious than Cambodia. With the recent improvements in Cambodia, Timor has indeed fulfilled that dire prediction. The situation is urgent: Americans must work for the entry of large numbers of foreign medical personnel, nutritionists and observers if East Timor is to be saved.

There are many effective things you can do to help. In particular, write letters to the following (and send copies to the organizations below):

- Your senators and congresspeople.
- Local newspapers.
- Patricia Derian, Asst. Secretary for Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs, US Dept. of State, 2201 C St. NW, Washington, DC 20520
- Ambassador Edward E. Masters, US Embassy (Indonesia), APO, San Francisco, CA 96356.
- President Suharto Istana Negaro, Jalan Veteran, Jakarta, Indonesia.

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